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SUBJECT: BURMESE EXILES RALLY AROUND VOTE NO, BUT STRATEGY LACKING

REF: CHIANG MAI 43

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REASON: 1.4 (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Though opposition to Burma's draft constitution and a "vote no" campaign have unprecedentedly united Burmese exile groups in Thailand, the exiles have so far failed to plan strategically for the post-referendum political environment. The exiles have outlined three scenarios for what will happen after the May referendum, but none appear based on the realities on the ground in Burma. They have also developed a "transitional plan" for post-referendum governance, but they appear not to have coordinated it with activists inside. Separately, a public debate broadcast into Burma from Thailand provided analysis of the referendum and constitution, but did not conclude with any joint calls to action. Unless the exile groups share information about their networks with each other and focus on helping Burma progress toward democracy, rather than preoccupy themselves with ensuring their own survival and the pecking order in the community, the Burmese exiles are unlikely to have a significant impact on the political process inside the country either now or in the near future. End Summary.

An Assessment of the Exiles' Past

¶2. (C) Over the past two-plus decades, the Burmese diaspora in Thailand has been unable to work together as a collective force for change in Burma. Though individual members of certain groups, such as the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, the Political Defiance Committee, and the Ethnic Nationalities Council, have contact with activists inside Burma, the Thailand-based exiles have been unwilling to constructively pool their efforts and share information about their networks with each other. These groups have often competed against each other for limited funding from numerous donors and have not been as welcoming to participation by activists who have fled to the Thai border more recently, most notably in the wake of the crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations in 2007. Without sponsorship by an exile group, those activists who reach Thailand are often left to fend for themselves, potentially facing harassment by Thai authorities and possible deportation. (Note: Many of the exile groups have built relationships with Thai authorities that enable them to avoid deportation by intervening either with the Thai police or intelligence offices. Their contacts also usually warn the exiles ahead of time when their residences/offices will be searched.)

¶3. (C) Despite the cliquey nature of the exile community, several groups have begun to work together in a more cohesive manner. They include the Forum for Democracy in Burma, Ethnic Nationalities Council, Political Defiance Committee, Woman's League of Burma, National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, National Council of the Union of Burma, Nationalities Youth Forum, and the Student Youth Council of Burma. Under the umbrella of the Strategic Coordinating Committee (SCC), which has been in existence since 2001 though largely dormant for much of that time, they are actively discussing policy issues, and they have agreed to jointly submit proposals requesting funding for their activities.

¶4. (C) In addition to the SCC, which is the main planning mechanism, the same groups are also working together in the Committee for Mass Movement (CMM), which has been in existence since 2006. The CMM is designed to be the main action-oriented body carrying out the SCC's decisions. It is composed of two committees -- a 16-person coordination committee, and a nine-person committee specifically charged with managing activities regarding the May constitutional referendum. According to Edie Bowles, a consultant working for USAID, this latter committee has devised plans to monitor voting on referendum day in 50 townships, but is in need of technical assistance if it is to succeed. She pointed out in an April 9 meeting that its members have had limited or no exposure to elections and balloting. Though they want to develop guidelines for voting, they do not have the knowledge to do so, and would have difficulty disseminating them inside Burma even if they could compile them. (Comment: Though Bowles opined that the CMM's plans for voter monitoring are coordinated with the Ethnic Nationalities Council's, the latter's plans are very different and much more ambitious--see reftel. Bowles specifically said the CMM does not plan to do exit polling as the ENC does.)

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Yes, But...

¶5. (C) Bowles opined that she sees a renewed energy among the groups in the SCC and CMM, and a willingness to work together in ways they never did previously. Other contacts share her assessment, noting that the vast majority have agreed that a "vote no" campaign is the best option to oppose the referendum, and is certainly preferable to a boycott. That said, the Thailand-based exiles, aside from the ENC, appear to have failed to come up with coherent strategies to pursue their objectives, and Bowles assessed that many will advocate a boycott of the 2010 elections. They view participating in new elections as de-legitimizing the 1990 elections, she noted -- a step many of them are not willing to take. (Note: Many MPs elected in 1990 are either in prison, dead, no longer politically active, or have resettled in other countries.)

¶6. (C) Bowles told us the SCC met on April 6 and agreed on three possible scenarios that could play out after the referendum. According to the first one, the constitution is not approved via the referendum, the regime does not recognize that it has lost, and the exile groups call for a mass uprising. In the second one, voters do not approve the constitution, the regime recognizes it has lost, and the exile groups call for the formation of an interim government. According to Bowles, the SCC and CMM have a plan for the establishment of a unity interim government. However, when asked if that plan had been coordinated with activists inside, she opined that it had not. The third scenario appears to be a contingency plan in the event that neither of the first two scenarios plays out. According to it, if vote no is unsuccessful, the National League for Democracy will call for the 1990 Parliament to be seated with

the support of the SCC. (Comment: If this final scenario plays out, the SCC alliance is unlikely to stick together since the ethnic groups have much more to be gained by running in the 2010 election, in which they could contest seats, than they do by supporting calls for the 1990 Parliament, many of whose members are no longer in Burma, to be seated.)

Public debate Highlights Flaws of Constitution

¶7. (C) Despite the flaws in their strategic planning, the Thailand-based exiles did successfully come together to broadcast analysis of the constitution and referendum process inside Burma. Organized by the Democratic Voice of Burma, the April 3 discussion drew approximately 75 participants. Organizations represented on the discussion panel included the Irrawaddy, National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, National Council of the Union of Burma, Woman's League of Burma, Ethnic Nationalities Council, and Members of Parliament Union. Panelists discussed the weaknesses of the 104 Principles, the draft constitution, the National Convention, and the referendum process. Various issues were tabled, including the role of the media, the views of ethnic minority groups on the referendum, and how to sell "vote no" to Burmese who are not politically active or savvy. Most importantly, the Democratic Voice of Burma broadcast the event into the country on television. Though we cannot assess the number of TV viewers that actually watched the program, the Democratic Voice of Burma estimates that 1-2 million people inside the country have access to its TV broadcasts.

Comment

¶8. (C) Though the fact that the exile groups in Thailand have united behind "vote no" is positive, their ability to plan strategically and realistically for the long-term, and to truly coordinate with each other and with activists inside is disappointing. Though some exile groups do have good contacts inside the country, these relationships are largely based on trust among certain individuals, and do not extend to organizations as a whole. Furthermore, exile groups are generally not willing to share their contacts inside Burma with each other.

¶9. (C) Activists inside continue to inform Embassy Rangoon they have received very little financial support from border groups and Burmese exiles since the assistance networks these groups had established were disrupted last September. Some groups that have told us they are getting money through to the activists inside include The Democratic Voice of Burma and a Danish company called International Media Services that are providing equipment to stringers (the USG does not fund International Media Services). Embassy Rangoon also confirmed that some funds

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sent from Thailand to Burma by Bo Kyi of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners are supporting current and former political prisoners and their families. Aung Myo Tint, a member of Generation 88 who has since fled to Thailand, also told Consulate Chiang Mai that after the demonstrations last August-September, the group received money from across the border to establish safe havens and purchase phones. Despite this financial and in-kind support, until the exile groups begin truly working with activists inside in a comprehensive and organized manner, they are unlikely to have a major impact on the course of political events in Burma either now or in the near future.

¶10. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Bangkok and Rangoon.
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